Education and Culture Committee

Budget scrutiny workshops, 8 September 2015

Chair: George Adam MSP

Present: Six officials representing Scottish local authorities, mostly from education services with one from a finance service, and COSLA.

The following is a summary of the key topics that were discussed.

Pressure on education budgets

Local authorities' main concern was their duty to maintain teacher numbers in line with the Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR).

They wanted greater flexibility in managing their education budget—

- The PTR policy (and the council tax freeze) means authorities do not have the necessary flexibility to deliver services to meet local needs.
- Authorities know what services are needed in their local areas. There was a feeling that the Scottish Government's decision to impose the PTR policy on local authorities implied a lack of trust in their ability to deliver appropriate services.
- Authorities wanted more flexibility in deciding how to deliver against the targets set by the Scottish Government, and emphasised that existing accountability structures were in place to support this.

They were constrained by how to make savings and cuts—

- As spending on teachers is effectively protected, any savings must be found from other areas of council spending, which means that authorities must find savings from community services, including child support and education, and other targeted services.
- Cutting targeted services that provide specialist support to pupils could make teachers' jobs more difficult. As a result, teachers may need to take on certain additional roles.
- The cost of teachers' pensions is increasing, which puts additional pressure on councils to find savings elsewhere in their budgets.

They suggested PTR is inconsistent with objectives relating to early years intervention and childcare—

- Authorities said they needed to provide support for vulnerable children from, for example, immigrant populations or families with drugs problems, which required tailor-made, targeted support services.

- They suggested it was too simplistic to say that teacher numbers and class sizes were the most important things for raising attainment.
- Authorities said they were fully engaged in delivering targeted services through the early years collaborative and in raising attainment, which seem to contrast with the uniform approach that now seems to be being taken.
- Authorities called for education policy to be refocused on attainment and away from teacher numbers.

Employing teachers

Local authorities said it could be difficult to attract and retain teachers—

- Some authorities, particularly those in rural or northern areas, found it difficult to attract and retain teachers.
- Authorities recognised that workforce planning was critical.
- There is an over-supply of posts, which gives teachers a lot of choice about where to take up employment.
- Young teachers are more mobile than they used to be and may choose not to take up employment immediately after completing their training.
- As a result, some authorities over-appoint teachers on the assumption that 10% won't take up their posts, which is hugely costly.

There was little support for the requirement to provide non-contact teaching time—

- There was recognition that teachers needed time to prepare lessons and that this was an important part of their job.
- However, fulfilling the requirement to give teachers non-contact teaching time (2.5 hours per week), was said to be extremely costly in terms of providing teaching cover.

Quality of teachers—

- It was important to have good quality head teachers with the necessary leadership skills.
- Authorities suggested more could be done to share best practice across schools and provide leadership support for head teachers.
- There was sometimes a failure to tackle under-performance of teachers as some schools didn't have suitably-qualified replacements. Some schools take the view that it is better that pupils get some teaching in a subject rather than none at all.

Sharing and integrating services

There was interest in how education services could be shared across local authorities and the opportunities this could offer for delivering efficiency savings—

- Comparisons were drawn with the centralisation of local services underway in the police and fire services.
- Authorities had varying approaches to sharing services - one attendee represented a joint education service, another shared some financial links with other councils, while others had little experience at all.
- The joint service provider was still required to report to two education committees with two separate governance structures, which created complications and challenges. However, having a joint board had cut management costs.
- The big question was said to be whether local elected members would be prepared to 'let go' of their control over local service provision. It could be difficult to convince councillors to give up total influence over education services.
- It was also suggested the public might not support joint service provision for fear of losing their democratic say over how services are provided. In response to this, however, it was argued that local schools would remain the key interface and that any changes to management/ governance structures would not affect this.

There was recognition that local authority departments should be integrated as much as possible—

- There was support for integrating services, such as ICT and back-office setup, which should result in efficiency savings.

Other issues raised

A number of other issues were raised that had implications for the delivery of education services.

There was support for the principals of Curriculum for Excellence—

- The Curriculum's focus on individual pupils' learning needs, through teaching them how to collaborate and use ICT were welcomed. However, it appeared to some that there has been a loss of nerve in implementing Curriculum for Excellence and they suggested it should be allowed to play out.

Attainment Challenge Fund was criticised because it not available to all authorities—

- Some authorities suggested the Fund had not been properly thought through. They felt the criterion of 70% social deprivation, on which the Fund was based, was an arbitrary figure. This criterion gave the Fund a strong urban focus as deprivation tends to be spread more thinly in rural areas.

Questions were raised about the plans to introduce standardised testing—

- There was a fear this policy would 'chip away' at the idea the teacher is in charge of the class and knows their pupils' learning needs. Authorities called for clarity

about why testing is being introduced – is it to further learning or to provide accountability across the system? It was considered that testing could be of some value if it allowed educationalists to identify where interventions were needed in order to raise attainment and promote learning.

Support for adopting a collaborative approach to service provision—

- There was value in adopting a collaborative approach, which involved parents and took account of support structures outside the classroom. This would help ensure pupils were receptive to learning.

Call for introducing incentives for exceeding targets—

- Authorities should be rewarded for good performance and not just punished for poor performance. It was suggested the National Improvement Framework could have a role in promoting this. Authorities wanted a sophisticated debate about the NIF, avoiding micro-managing schools and authorities.

Pressure to provide free transport to and from school—

- There is sometimes political pressure to provide free transport for pupils to and from school over and above what is required by statute. This is costly and diverts resources away from providing other services.

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